

NARRATOR: Johnson, Tommy “Shep”

INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves

DATE: May 1, 2001

LOCATION: Vale, Oregon

PROJECT: Smokejumping/Forest Fire Fighting

Tape

Counter Summary

000 Introduction.

010 Johnson discussed his early life, including the work his father did during the Great Depression. Johnson attended school and stayed with his parents and other family members in southwestern Idaho, including New Meadows and Weiser. Johnson graduated from New Meadows High School, and after graduation he enlisted in the Marine Corps and served during the Korean War. He served in the military for five years.

065 After he finished with the military, he quickly became involved with smokejumping. His brother, Miles Johnson, helped to get him a job with the smokejumpers. He initially did not want to jump out of airplanes, but he quickly changed his mind, basically because he did not desire to work on his uncle’s cattle ranch anymore. He started with the jumpers in the summer of 1956. Until 1962, he jumped out of airplanes over 100 times. He worked in the early fire season in Silver City, New Mexico, and also went to Alaska to work.

125 During his time with the jumpers, Johnson was recruited, through other smokejumpers, by the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) to work on jobs during the non-fire season. At first Johnson did not join the CIA because he had a girlfriend. After that relationship ended, Johnson began working for the CIA. Johnson offered his opinions about why the CIA recruited smokejumpers to work for them.

175 Johnson continued to describe his work for the CIA. He said that most jumpers that were recruited worked in the early fire season at Silver City, New Mexico. Johnson and other smokejumpers worked in various locales throughout the world, including Tibet, Guatemala, Nicaragua, Laos, and Thailand.

215 Johnson and two other smokejumpers, John “Tex” Lewis and Andy Anderson, worked for the CIA between 1960 and 1961 in Southeast Asia, kicking cargo out of airplanes to troops fighting the North Vietnamese in Laos. He described the flight plan of the airplanes, including its beginning and ending point in Okinawa, Japan.

- 275 From Southeast Asia Johnson and Lewis along with other smokejumpers trained Guatemalans to jump out of airplanes (C-46's). Johnson jumped out of airplanes during his tenure with the CIA so many times that he lost count.
- 325 From Guatemala Johnson and other jumpers went to Nicaragua to prepare planes for the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba. He talked about the jobs he did in preparation for this secret endeavor and the aspects of the invasion that he knew or heard about. He also mentioned that they wanted him to serve as a volunteer fire fighter to aid any planes that came back to Nicaragua on fire; Johnson refused that duty. According to Johnson, no planes returned in flames, although most had bullet holes dotted all over them.
- 420 Johnson returned to smokejumping in the spring of 1961. John "Tex" Lewis and two other smokejumpers returned to Southeast Asia. Lewis and two jumpers lost their lives when the planes they kicked cargo from crashed.
- 480 **END OF SIDE ONE**
TAPE ONE SIDE TWO
- 000 Johnson returned to Southeast Asia to work for the CIA after Lewis and the others died. He talked about the aspects of his job in Laos and Thailand. He also described one flight he kicked cargo from in Tibet.
- 040 Johnson showed a picture of himself, "Paperlegs" Peterson, and his brother, Miles, in front of a C-130 airplane. He talked about the jobs he did from the airplane and the different way they used the C-130 airplane to supply anti-communist forces in Southeast Asia.
- 080 Johnson returned to smokejumping in 1962, which was his last year as a smokejumper. After that summer Johnson worked for the CIA full time. He moved to Marana, Arizona, to work for Intermountain Aviation. Johnson offered his memories of Operation Cold Foot, even though he did not work with that operation.
- 135 Johnson talked about the types of airplanes used during his career with the CIA. He discussed in detail his training with a B-17 airplane for possible land or sea rescue of downed pilots and crew.
- 185 Johnson and two other smokejumpers moved to Vietnam, dropping cargo and training the anti-communist Vietnamese. Johnson and "Paperlegs" Peterson worked on Operation Switchback; he explained what that operation entailed.

- 230 Johnson talked about other smokejumpers, including Ken Hessel, that trained the PARU troops in Thailand. He explained what training these smokejumpers gave to these military personnel. Johnson himself later helped to train the PARU troops.
- 280 Intermountain Aviation began to work with groups, such as the United States Forest Service, and the Bureau of Land Management. Johnson worked on kicking cargo onto forest fires during the late 1960s. In 1969 he and his family went to Southeast Asia (Savannakhet). He explained his job in this area, which was basically dropping cargo to Hmong people in Laos, and working in Laos re-rigging supplies to fly into smaller bases where only small planes could land.
- 380 The major Hmong base was called Long Chieng, which was attacked one evening by the Vietnamese while Johnson was working there. He talked, in detail, about the attack; Johnson was wounded during this battle. He continued to talk about the work he and a fellow smokejumper, Jerry Daniels, did during that evening.
- 440 **END OF SIDE TWO**
TAPE TWO SIDE ONE
- 000 [No introduction.] Daniels asked for air support to help the Hmong during this attack. The planes that flew in for support dropped a bomb that missed the Vietnamese, and hit the bunker that Daniels and Johnson were in. Johnson explained how he called off the next bombing run, because he knew the next run would destroy the bunker. He continued to describe this attack and the morning after. Johnson was required to open the airstrip, even though he was injured. He also mentioned the number of people injured by the attack; Johnson said it seemed to be many more than the official total.
- 060 After the injury Johnson served as a Roving Air Delivery Officer. He explained the aspects of that job; he worked at that job until he retired from the CIA in 1990.
- 070 After the CIA Johnson worked at several jobs for the Bureau of Land Management until the Reduction In Force (RIF) cost him his job. He then worked for a lumber mill, but he did not enjoy that work. He got a job in Alaska, working for the BLM.
- 100 He explained his job in Alaska for the BLM that basically dealt with providing aerial support. He worked at this job until he was injured in a truck accident.

115 Johnson describes the truck accident in detail. He knew the truck had faulty brakes, but he needed to use it. The brakes failed during a downhill grade, so Johnson jumped from the truck. The truck crashed into the trees, avoiding the Alaskan Pipeline, and it caught fire for a moment. He explained why the truck did not blow up. He tore the muscles in his left shoulder, but he did not figure that out immediately, because he felt pain all over his body.

285 After the injury Johnson moved to Vale, Oregon, to work as a liaison for fire crews. He retired through workman's compensation in 1990. After his retirement he has helped his wife run her Arabian horse business.

325 **END OF SIDE ONE**
END OF INTERVIEW

NAMES AND PLACES INDEX

Anderson, Andy
Bay of Pigs Invasion (Cuba)
Beasley, Ray
Bevins, David
Bureau of Land Management
Central Intelligence Agency
Daniels, Jerry
Eubanks, Darral
Fairbanks, Alaska
Guatemala, Retalhuleu
Hessel, Ken
Intermountain Aviation
Johnson, Miles
Laos
Lewis, John “Tex”
Marana, Arizona
McCall, Idaho
Missoula, Montana
Monroe Creek (Idaho)
New Meadows, Idaho
Nicaragua
Okinawa, Japan
Peterson, “Paperlegs”
Silver City, New Mexico
Takhli [airbase in Thailand]
Thailand
Thorsroot [?], Garth
Tibet
United States Forest Service
United States Marine Corps
Vale, Oregon
Webb, Wayne
Weiser, Idaho

NARRATOR: Johnson, Tommy "Shep"

INTERVIEWER: Troy Reeves

DATE: May 30, 2001

LOCATION: Vale, Oregon

PROJECT: Smokejumping/Forest Fire Fighting

[Interviewer's note: Johnson's house was filled with numerous dogs. Anyone listening should know that barks, growls, and other noises (dogs running across the tile) fill this interview.]

Tape

Counter

Summary

000	Introduction.
010	With prompting from the interviewer, Johnson talked in detail about his military service with the Marine Corps, mainly during the Korean War. He discussed his service from boot camp through his discharge. He trained in southern California and went to Korea in 1951. Johnson served in a tank battalion, and he told many stories about the people he served with, battles, and skirmishes that his group saw. Shep was injured in Korea, and he returned to the States after the injury.
385	When Shep returned to the United States, he was not treated well by a nurse in the hospital he stayed at while recovering from his injury. He continued to discuss where he served with the Marines after Korea. He said that before the Korean War ended, several group of Marines were loaded into ships. Shep felt they were going to Indochina, but the truce was signed for the Korean War. The Marines on the ships went to Japan.
455	Since the war has ended, Shep has kept in touch with only one person, John Schroeder, who currently lives in Boise. He talked about how both of them were from the U.S. West, so they kindled a friendship. They read each other's local papers, when they arrived via the mail.
485	END OF SIDE ONE TAPE ONE SIDE TWO
000	He talked about John Schroeder's wife, Gladys, who currently works for U.S. Senator Larry Craig. Shep told a story about John Schroeder and when Schroeder received a "Dear John" letter.
030	Johnson offered his opinions about why Korean War veterans were treated differently than other war veterans. He felt that the way the war ended and the staggered way the troops returned helped to make the Korean War not as memorable as World War II. Johnson told the interviewer why he

joined the Marines. A man he knew from New Meadows, Idaho, who was a Marine, convinced Johnson to join.

- 085 Johnson talked about the current U.S. military training and status. Johnson offered his opinions about women in the military. Women, according to Johnson, forced the military and smokejumpers to change most of their protocols.
- 130 Johnson described his first few weeks as a rookie smokejumper ("ned"). He talked about a project he worked on near Camp Creek. He did not have much difficulty with veteran smokejumpers, because his brother was already a smokejumper. He said he got along with the other smokejumpers because he knew that they might depend on each other while fighting fires.
- 175 He said he felt apprehensive at the time his first jump approached. He jumped with "Paperlegs" Peterson on the Ruby Mountain fire near Warren, Idaho. He talked about some problems that occurred on that first jump, mainly between Peterson and another jumper.
- 260 Johnson told another story about a fire on the Salmon-Challis National Forest. He jumped with Max Allen, and they became tangled in their parachutes during the jump. He talked about the aftermath of the jump and about a German word on Allen's belt buckle. Later in life, Johnson found out what that German word meant.
- 310 Johnson told a story about a hunting trip with Max Allen and "Paperlegs" Peterson near New Meadows, Idaho.
- 355 Another former smokejumper who had always stuck out in his mind was Ken Smith. He told a story about himself, Smith, and a motorcycle. Smith, Allen, and Johnson would jump during the spring in Silver City, New Mexico. Johnson briefly discussed jumping in New Mexico.
- 415 Johnson told a story about the flip of a coin; smokejumpers determined who would do what job, (usually a bad one). Johnson told a story about one coin flip. He continued to tell a story about Ken Hessel, another smokejumper, and how Hessel was thrown out of a bar for destroying an arcade machine.
- 490 **END OF SIDE TWO**
TAPE TWO SIDE ONE
- 000 [No introduction.] Johnson continued to talk about a fellow smokejumper, Ken Hessel. He then talked briefly about smokejumpers, including himself and Hessel, who worked for the CIA in Southeast Asia.

- 020 With prompting from the interviewer, Johnson talked about the importance of the coin flip to determine which smokejumper did what job (or who paid for the beers). Johnson discussed one particular coin flip to determine who would drink a triple-shot of alcohol. The same person lost at least three coin flips and took three drinks.
- 055 Some smokejumpers during Johnson's time, including Johnson, tried to rodeo during the time away from smokejumping. (He talked about a couple of particular rodeos, including one that the smokejumpers fought, after the rodeo, with the professional cowboys).
- 135 In the book, *Tragic Mountains*, the author told a story about a rodeo held in Laos at a military outpost called Long Chieng between Johnson and Jerry "Hog" Daniels. Johnson talked in detail about this event. Daniels' bull bucked him off quickly. Johnson rode his bull, so he was declared the winner. Johnson said later he was disqualified because he rode the bull with two hands. There was no rematch, because the North Vietnamese bombed the area soon after the event.
- 210 When talking about places that smokejumpers frequented after work, Johnson told a story about one smokejumper that was almost fired when he drove his car in reverse on McCall's main street. He also told a story about a barber in McCall that occasionally gave bad haircuts.
- 280 Johnson claimed that the locals in McCall treated the smokejumpers fairly well. He said that they tried to keep rowdy smokejumpers in line to help keep a good relationship with the other McCall residents. He talked about what types of people lived in McCall during the summer. Johnson mentioned one smokejumper, Ken "Moose" Salyer, who would help smokejumpers if they got in a fracas in the bar.
- 340 With prompting from the interviewer, Johnson offered his opinions about why smokejumpers keep in touch with each other. He said that smokejumping was like a brotherhood. Johnson jumped in the early season in Silver City, New Mexico, so he worked with jumpers from other bases. Therefore, he has kept in touch with jumpers from places other than McCall. He also mentioned that several sets of brothers jumped out of McCall, which helped to foster a brotherhood.
- 480 Johnson concluded this interview talking about an Air America reunion that Johnson and Ken Hessel were going to attend that weekend (May 31-June 3, 2001). He mentioned how Hessel will start to tell some tall tales.
- 500 **END OF SIDE ONE**
TAPE TWO SIDE TWO

000 Johnson finished his talk about Ken Hessel.

005 **END OF SIDE TWO**
END OF INTERVIEW

NAMES AND PLACES INDEX

Allen, Max
Anderson, Andy
Beasley, Ray
Bremerton, Washington
Camp Creek (Idaho)
Camp Pendleton, California
Catlin, Del
Christensen, Chris
Council, Idaho
Daniels, Jerry
Daly, Mike
Eubanks, Darral
Filler, Bud
Foresters' Club (McCall)
Hessel, Ken
Intermountain Aviation (Marana, Arizona)
Jackson, Reid
Johnson, Miles
Korean War
Lewis, John "Tex"
Long Chieng, Laos
Magel, John
Marana, Arizona
McCall, Idaho
New Meadows, Idaho
Payette National Forest
Peterson, Richard "Paperlegs"
Phillips, Bud
Ruby Mountain (Idaho)
Salmon River
Salmon-Challis National Forest
Salyer, Ken "Moose"
San Diego, California
Schroeder, Gladys
Schroeder, John
Scott, Toby (Ranolph)
Shore Lodge (McCall)
Silver City, New Mexico
Smith, Ken
The Dog House (McCall)
United States Marine Corps
Yacht Club (McCall)